

Lady Margaret Thatcher spoke in San Angelo last week. Angelo Community Hospital and Angelo State University sponsored the program under a humanities chair set up by a compadre of mine named Ralph Chase. Competition for tickets hit all-time highs for the event, surpassing all the interest shown the previous lecturers.

Only 2800 seats were possible in the University's sport center. Security precautions required tickets be picked up in person. Scotland Yard and the State Department checked ahead of schedule, assuring the safety of the building and the grounds.

Three weeks before her speech, the box office opened to a Monday morning with snow still on the ground in the shade of the college's buildings. In an hour and a half, all of the tickets were gone.

On the night of the speech the gymnasium started open seating at 6:30 to keep the audience from lining up again to be in the building by eight o'clock. The sleet and ice on the streets should have made Lady Thatcher homesick. The setting was more like the chill off the North Sea in London than San Angelo.

Plenty of familiar faces spotted the choice sections by the time I made it into town from the ranch. Media coverage was limited to one reporter and one photographer from the daily news, so there was no hope of grabbing a spot in the news box.

Two or three times, winding my way toward the distant bleachers, I stopped and told several acquaintances it was too late to restore my good will by offering to give up their seats. But who expects the urban throngs to show the slightest respect for an old rancher spending his last days so they can add to their hedonistic feasting on racks of lamb and loins of beef raised by bend of his back and sweat of his brow. The loyalty of those hombres over in the wool capital lasts about as long as a bellman's devotion after a tip has hit the palm of his hand.

Lady Thatcher spoke for 45 minutes on "The New World Order." Her gaze swept the audience; the power of her voice rose and fell to the gestures of her hands, like the maestro of the Viennese Royal Symphony Orchestra directing his favorite waltz. Her skill as a spellbinder revealed how she could be prime minister of the U. K. for eleven and a half years, serving longer than any other minister since 1827.

She stirred the audience with phrases like "the disciples of liberty and justice," and "the sanctity of humanity." Skilled, passionate oratory; laudatory material praising the generosity of America, playing right into the laps of a West Texas audience; sly, smart references to her success talking to Mrs. Gorbachev behind the scenes and a plug at every opening for her friend Ronald Reagan.

At the gate, professors passed out cards to address questions to Lady Thatcher after she spoke. Her opinion of health care, I learned later, dominated the queries. Some bright kid, probably already on the road to public office, changed the subject by asking what her goals were at 12 years of age.

She answered by a review of how her family read books and held weekly discussions led by her father, a local office holder. Another question was what were her two biggest successes and her two biggest failures as Prime Minister.

She plunged into a synopsis of her role in the Falklands and her immediate support of President Bush in defending Kuwait. Without mincing a word, she took credit for turning socialism back in the U. K. But true to the core of her public instincts, she skipped the mention of failures.

My question was stopped by the committee screening the material. I didn't care about goals or battlegrounds, I wanted her to help San Angelo settle the site for their new jail, so news could go back to writing of such exciting events as the prairie dog towns out on the Pecos River and giving schools like Mertzton more coverage for their football and basketball teams.

Those one-time pals sitting around hogging the good seats sure could have used a dose of Lady Thatcher's charm.

The next time Willie Nelson comes to Mertzton to do a benefit for the farmers, I'm going to repay a few of those little omissions. Cut 2800 tickets in half and you get 1400. That means standing room only for out of town visitors.